

## The Indian Society as Guru Nanak Found it

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**G**OD created man in His own image and as a member of the human family made him equal with others. In the eyes of the Lord there is no difference between man and man. There is no high-born and there is no low-born. There are no people chosen of Him, and none condemned and discarded by Him. The differences of race and colour are due to geographical situation and climatic conditions of the land of their birth. With his migration to hot and dry climate, the white man's skin changes its colour and becomes brown and a coloured man's complexion gradually changes to whitish in cold climate. The difference of race and colour, therefore, is meaningless. The political boundaries of countries also are not permanent. With changes in them, nationalities of people change. They also change with permanent migration of people from one country to another. The Britishers and French thus become Australians. As history knows it, several groups of people have disappeared without any visible trace of their nationalities and many a new nation have come into existence. Like the Canadians, the Americans, the Australians, the Indians, the Pakistanis and others, nations are amalgams of different groups and races of people coming, in course of time, from different climes and countries. Similarly different creeds and religions of people change with changes in their professions and vocations. These differences, therefore, have no permanent

basis. Men are men all the world over, whether white or coloured, Eastern or Western, belonging to this country or that, rich or poor, Jews, Christians or Muhammadans, or developed or undeveloped are the same.

The unity of mankind is undeniable. It is only when the self in the man gets the upper hand in him that he seeks to see or invent distinctions. He excites and exploits the narrow religious or national sentiments of people to justify and further his ends and uses means to perpetuate the exploitation of the simple and gullible folk. This exploitation of the simple by the clever is the root cause of the miseries in the world and is the basis of irritation and hatred among people and of disturbances and wars among nations, leading to massacres of millions of innocent people and destruction of invaluable national property. This is neither religious in any sense of the word, however stretched, nor moral by any code of society. This spoliation and destruction of God's creation, simply because it either belongs to a persuasion other than that of the aggressor or that its elimination or weakness will add to his resources and power, is a sin both against God and man. No true religion or religious prophet sanctions it. It is anti-God, inhuman and irreligious in the extreme. No honest believer in God could do it. It is only a selfcentred lip-believer who indulges in it. And he digs his own grave with it,

It is not in keeping with the philosophy of atheists either. They believe in the natural evolution of things and in their causes and natural effects. The natural effect of aggression, of spoliation and destruction, and of disturbance of peace through riots, invasions and wars, opposition and hatred which multiply and continue, adding to physical and mental agony and misery to both sides. The disturbance of peace retards the progress of science, art and culture and does incalculable harm to the advancement of human civilization. Above all, it feeds vanity and self-conceit of the aggressor, deadens his conscience and kills his sense of regard for the rights and aspirations of others. Gradually the aggressor develops the habit of self-centred bigotry and fanaticism in his conduct and behaviour. With the spread of this contagion among those so inclined, around them, it vitiates the atmosphere and so affects their mental and physical activities as to become a source of danger to their peaceable neighbours, and to humanity at large. In their lust for power and greed for unlawful booty, these brutes pounce upon unsuspecting and less warlike people carrying fire and sword into their land, causing untold misery and devastation to them. But ultimately it works to the ruin of the aggressors and tyrants themselves. Sin and tyranny are the worst enemies of the tyrants. When tyranny pushes too far and becomes unbearable, a revolting reaction takes place on the other side. Under such circumstances, a will to resist and retaliate is then created and strengthened even in the meekest and a new life is infused in them to oppose evil. Sparrows then turn into hawks and jackals into lions. In the contest that then ensues

between the oppressors and the oppressed, the evil-doer goes down and meets his deserts in perdition, to the eternal disgrace of his community and nation.

In the last quarter of the fifteenth century, northern India was ruled by the Lodhis. They had inherited a tradition of unbridled autocracy which had not unoften reduced itself to ruthless tyranny, making the lives of the people, their subjects, miserable. The pages of the history of this period written by the best informed even Muslim chroniclers, nearest to the royal courts, are full of heart-rending tales of persecution, tortures and executions of their non-Muslim subjects. They are too horrible to be related here. It will do for purpose to give some of the observations of a contemporary saint of the Punjab, Guru Nanak, who was born in 1469 during the reign of Bahlol Lodhi (1450-1488) and was twenty years old when Bahlol's son Sikandar Lodhi, the bigot, came to throne in 1488. Guru Nanak saw the whole of Sikandar's reign and that of his successor Ibrahim (1517-26). He had first hand-knowledge of the devastation and massacres, particularly of Saidpur (now known as Eminabad in West Pakistan), during the invasions of Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty in 1526. Referring to his times, Guru Nanak says :

The *Kal* age is a knife ; kings are butchers ;  
Justice has taken wings and fled.

In this dark night of falsehood,  
the moon of truth is never seen to rise.

I have become perplexed in my search ;  
in the darkness there is no way to be seen,

On account of others' ego, the world is  
crying in pain.  
Saith Nanak, how shall deliverance be  
obtained ?

*Mā jh ki Vār*, xvi-1.

In another hymn he observes :

The kings are tigers, their *muqaddams*  
the dogs.

They go and disturb people at all odd times. The officials of the king cause wounds with their nail-scratches, and the dogs lick the blood and bile that trickle.

When men will be judged, these shameless fellows will not be trusted.

*Vār Malār kī*, xxii

The dispensers of justice, the *qāzīs*, tell lies  
and eat dirt.

The *qāzī* sits to dispense justice—he counts the rosary and mutters the name of God, But he takes bribes and decides against just rights.

If any one questions, he quotes authorities.

(*Rāmkaṭi kī Vār*, xi)

Suppressed by the ruling class, the Hindu subjects, depressed in spirit, were lost to all sense of honour and self-respect. Like dumb driven cattle they meekly submitted to the rod of the foreigner. The Kshatriyas, whose *dharma* it was to defend the country and its people, adopted the ways and manners of their alien masters, and became their agents and played as their engines of suppression. In their own land, the temples of Brahmanical gods and goddesses were desecrated and demolished or

heavy taxes were levied upon them. In their own homes they had neither the freedom of worship, nor of expression and action. With the loss of their political independence was also gone the freedom of their conscience and its voice and expression.

Why was this land of philosophers and great scholars reduced to this state of abject slavery? It was because their house was divided into innumerable sections and sub-sections and they all pulled in different and opposite directions. Whatever were the intentions of the originators of classes or of the caste-philosophers, the classes and castes had developed into water-tight compartments of the privileged and power-mad few and of the working and serving masses, of the exploiters and the exploited, of the superior castes and the lower ones, who were further discriminated against as depressed *sudrās* and condemned untouchables. All this was the negation of the oneness of the human-kind. It bred hatred and separateness and removed them, both mentally and spiritually, away from one another. And the pity of it is that this all came to happen in the name of religion, and of gods and goddesses. With the passage of time, this divisionism acquired so strong a hold on them all that it became a second nature with them and could not be shaken off.

Added to this was the life of inertness preached by various sects of ascetic *sādhus* who moved about in the country telling people that human life was *māyā* and *mithyā*, an illusion and unreality. The most prominent and influential among them during the days of Guru Nanak were the Nath Panthi *yogis* who

were responsible for creating in the people, particularly of northern India, an indifference towards life of action and social obligations towards society to which they belonged and which contributed to their very existence and maintenance. This was the attitude of defaulting debtors who betrayed their benefactors and helpers and disappeared from their normal places of residence and activity to avoid payment, even in part, to their creditors. These defaulters deserve and should receive no shelter. They are punished and chastised by the defenders of the rights of others and the dispensers of justice and are thrown into jails to save the society from their further mischiefs. Even their sureties, at times, have to suffer for the sins and crimes of the defaulters. This applies equally to individuals as well as to groups of people regardless of the garbs and philosophies assumed by them.

In the field of religion, the preachings of the ascetics of this type had so affected the lives of people as to make them cowards who lay sheepishly prostrate at the feet of the misguiding priests and political aggressors. During his extensive tours throughout the Asiatic world Guru Nanak was pained to see vast masses of mankind subjected to spiritual and political tyranny in the name of religion and God. He found this world divided into two classes of people—one who in the name of God carried fire and sword to enforce their political sovereignty over others to be able to use their physical power and authority to destroy their faiths and to convert them to their own creed, the second who in the names of their innumerable god and goddesses were divided into various groups whose mutual

differences and antagonism had rendered them too weak to manfully face the persecuting aggressors. The former in their misguided zeal and power madness forgot the teachings of their religion that there was but One God who was the creator, the father, of the whole universe and that entire mankind was but one brotherhood, regardless of race and creed, and that He had not sent men into the world to be despoiled and slaughtered by their own kith and kin. The latter too in their forgetfulness and disregard of the Oneness of God and in their faith in the multiplicity of deities were quarrelling among themselves and spreading hatred among different castes and classes, damning and condemning those who did not belong to their own self-created higher castes as *sūdrās*, untouchables and *malechhās* or *yavanās*. Both classes of people, had apparently only lip-belief in the existence and omnipresence of God, while, in practice, with daggers drawn in hands, they flew at one another's throats, shouting the cries of their respective gods who in reality and truth, were the same One God, *Allāh* ( *wāhid-hū-lā-shrik* ) or *Brahm* ( *eko brahm dutiyo nasti* ). Thus truth had come to be forgotten and ignored, and the Brahmans and Mullas continued their mutual friction and and wranglings—*such kināre raih giā, khaih khaih mārde bāhman maulāne* ( *Bhar Gurdas, Var I-21* )

This was the state of religious affairs which prevailed in India and the neighbouring countries in the middle of the fifteenth century as a result of the wranglings that had existed for some centuries of the world. Bhai Gurdas, a learned scholar of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, born within a decade of the death of



## THE SIKH REVIEW

Guru Nanak, has drawn a very realistic picture of this period. He says :

There are four castes among the Hindus, and four sects among the Muslims in the world.

In egoism, arrogance and avarice, they are meaninglessly pulling and hauling.

The Hindus have their places of worship on the Ganges ( at Hardwar ) and at Benaras, and Muslims at Kaaba in Mecca.

The Muslims perform circumcision and the Hindus are enamoured of the sacred-thread. The One God is called Rama and Rahim, and both ( Hindus and Muslims ) have lost the way ( to Him ).

Having forgotten ( the teachings of ) the *Vedās* and the *Qurān*, they are enticed away by avarice of the Satanic world.

Truth has come to be left aside and the Brahmans and the Mullas are dying of mutual friction and wranglings.

( *Vār* I-21 )

Continuing his observations, Bhai Gurdas says in the next stanza :

Without the True Guide, there is all darkness. People are dying (suffering) in many (spiritual, social and political ) ways.

Without a ( real ) saint, no one can put a stop to it, and a saint is not to be seen in the world.

( *Ibid*, I- 2 )

In the words of Lord Krishna in the *Bhagvad Gita* ( iv, 7-8 ) reiterated by Guru Gobind Singh in the *Dasam-Granth* :

Whenever there is decay of righteousness, and unrighteousness exults in pride, then my spirit arises on earth.

For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the evil-doers and for firmly establishing righteousness, *dharma*, I am born from age to age.

This saw its fulfilment in the appearance of Guru Nanak in the world to bring back to God the strayed mankind and to make them realize through precept and example, the Oneness of the Lord and the closest brotherly relationship between them regardless of the country, colour, race or class.

How and how far he succeeded in his mission may be studied in his teachings incorporated in the Sikh scripture, the *Guru Granth Sāhib*, and in the lives of his successors and followers which are a living story of impact of Guru Nanak on history.